

# Chapter 1

## The Epic of Gilgamesh: A Great Flood

(c. 2700-2500 B.C.E.)

### 1 Introduction

2 The Epic of Gilgamesh, truly a remarkable mythic saga with many major philosophical and  
3 theological implications, also featured a description of a cleansing flood sent by the gods. Given  
4 the topography of Babylonia, with its untamed, turbulent rivers and frequent floods, one should  
5 not be surprised that the Babylonians would have created a myth based on such violent and  
6 destructive natural occurrences.

### 8 Questions to Consider

- 9 • Why did the god Enlil unleash the flood on the city of Shurruk? What does this reveal  
10 about how the Babylonians viewed their gods and their environment?
- 11 • How were some of the inhabitants of Shurruk able to survive this destructive event?

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14 You know the city Shurruk, it stands on the banks of Euphrates? That city grew old  
15 and the gods that were in it were old. There was Anu, Lord of the firmament, their father, and  
16 warrior Enlil their counsellor, Ninurta the helper, and Ennugi watcher over canals; and with them  
17 also was Ea. In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a  
18 wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamour. Enlil heard the clamour and he said to  
19 the gods in council, "The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by  
20 reason of the babel." So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because  
21 of his oath warned me in a dream. He whispered their words to my house of reeds, "Reed-house,  
22 reed-house! Wall, O wall, hearken reed-house, wall reflect; O man of Shurruk, son of Ubara-  
23 Tutu; tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise  
24 worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. These are  
25 the measurements of the barque as you shall build her: let her beam equal her length, let her deck  
26 be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss; then take up into the boat the seed of all living  
27 creatures."

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29 "When I had understood I said to my Lord, "Behold, what you have commanded I will  
30 honour and perform, but how shall I answer the people, the city, the elders?" Then Ea opened his  
31 mouth and said to me, his servant, "Tell them this: I have learnt that Enlil is wrathful against me,  
32 I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf to dwell with Ea  
33 my Lord. But on you he will rain down abundance, rare fish and shy wild-fowl, a rich harvest-  
34 tide. In the evening the rider of the storm will bring you wheat in torrents."

1       In the first light of dawn all my household gathered round me, the children brought pitch  
2 and the men whatever was necessary. On the fifth day I laid the keel and the ribs, then I made  
3 fast the planking. The ground-space was one acre, each side of the deck measured one hundred  
4 and twenty cubits, making a square. I built six decks below, seven in all, I divided them into nine  
5 sections with bulkheads between. I drove in wedges where needed, I saw to the punt-poles, and  
6 laid in supplies. The carriers brought oil in baskets, I poured pitch into the furnace and asphalt  
7 and oil; more oil was consumed in caulking, and more again the master of the boat took into his  
8 stores. I slaughtered bullocks for the people and every day I killed sheep. I gave the shipwrights  
9 wine to drink as though it were river water, raw wine and red wine and oil and white wine. There  
10 was feasting then as there is at the time of the New Year's festival; I myself anointed my head.  
11 On the seventh day the boat was complete.

12  
13       Then was the launching full of difficulty; there was shifting of ballast above and below  
14 till two thirds was submerged. I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my  
15 family, my kin, the beast of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen. I sent them on  
16 board, for the time that Shamash had ordained was already fulfilled when he said, "In the  
17 evening, when the rider of the storm sends down the destroying rain, enter the boat and batten  
18 her down." The time was fulfilled, the evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I  
19 looked out at the weather and it was terrible, so I too boarded the boat and battened her down.  
20 All was now complete, the battening and the caulking; so I handed the tiller to Puzur-Amurri the  
21 steersman, with the navigation and the care of the whole boat.

22  
23       With the first light of dawn a black cloud came from the horizon; it thundered within  
24 where Adad, Lord of the storm was riding. In front over hill and plain Shullat and Hanish,  
25 heralds of the storm, led on. Then the gods of the abyss rose up; Nergal pulled out the dams of  
26 the nether waters, Ninurta the war-Lord threw down the dykes, and the seven judges of hell, the  
27 Annunaki, raised their torches, lighting the land with their livid flame. A stupor of despair went  
28 up to heaven when the god of the storm turned daylight to darkness, when he smashed the land  
29 like a cup. One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, it poured over the people  
30 like the tide of battle; a man could not see his brother nor the people be seen from heaven. Even  
31 the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven, the firmament of Anu; they  
32 crouched against the walls, cowering like curs. Then Ishtar the sweet-voiced Queen of Heaven  
33 cried out like a woman in travail: "Alas the days of old are turned to dust because I commanded  
34 evil; why did I command this evil in the council of all the gods? I commanded wars to destroy  
35 the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they  
36 float in the ocean." The great gods of heaven and of hell wept, they covered their mouths.

37  
38       For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed  
39 the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned  
40 the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled; I looked at the face  
41 of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea  
42 stretched as flat as a roof-top; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I  
43 sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water.  
44 I looked for land in vain, but fourteen leagues distant there appeared a mountain, and there the  
45 boat grounded; on the mountain of Nisir the boat held fast, she held fast and did not budge. One  
46 day she held, and a second day on the mountain of Nisir she held fast and did not budge. A third

1 day, and a fourth day she held fast on the mountain and did not budge; a fifth day and a sixth day  
2 she held fast on the mountain. When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She  
3 flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew  
4 away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had  
5 retreated, she ate, she flew around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw  
6 everything open to the four winds, I made a sacrifice and poured out a libation on the mountain  
7 top. Seven and again seven cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and  
8 cedar and myrtle. When the gods smelled the sweet savour, they gathered like flies over the  
9 sacrifice. Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace with the jewels of heaven that  
10 once Anu had made to please her. "O you gods here present, by the lapis lazuli round my neck I  
11 shall remember these days as I remember the jewels of my throat; these last days I shall not  
12 forget. Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this  
13 offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction."  
14

15 "When Enlil had come, when he saw the boat, he was wroth and swelled with anger at the  
16 gods, the host of heaven, "Has any of these mortals escaped? Not one was to have survived the  
17 destruction." Then the god of the wells and canals Ninurta opened his mouth and said to the  
18 warrior Enlil, "Who is there of the gods that can devise without Ea? It is Ea alone who knows all  
19 things." Then Ea opened his mouth and spoke to warrior Enlil, "Wiseest of gods, hero Enlil, how  
20 could you so senselessly bring down the flood?  
21  
22

23 *Lay upon the sinner his sin,*  
24 *Lay upon the transgressor his transgression,*  
25 *Punish him a little when he breaks loose,*  
26 *Do not drive him too hard or he perishes;*  
27 *Would that a lion had ravaged mankind*  
28 *Rather than the flood,*  
29 *Would that a wolf had ravaged mankind*  
30 *Rather than the flood,*  
31 *Would that famine had wasted the world*  
32 *Rather than the flood,*  
33 *Would that pestilence had wasted mankind*  
34 *Rather than the flood.*  
35

36 It was not I that revealed the secret of the gods; the wise man learned it in a dream. Now  
37 take your counsel what shall be done with him."  
38

39 "Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and made us enter  
40 the boat and kneel down on either side, he standing between us. He touched our foreheads to  
41 bless us saying, "In time past Utnapishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall  
42 live in the distance at the mouth of the rivers." Thus it was that the gods took me and placed me  
43 here to live in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Epic of Gilgamesh, trans. N. K. Sanders (Baltimore: Penguin, 1960), 108-113.